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The Awakening of Knowledge in the Heart of Egypt: An Exegesis of Exodus 7:1-5

Andrew Krawtz

Exodus 7:1-5

¹The LORD said to Moses, "See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron shall be your prophet. ²You shall speak all that I command you, and your brother Aaron shall tell Pharaoh to let the Israelites go out of his land. ³But I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and I will multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt. ⁴When Pharaoh does not listen to you, I will lay my hand upon Egypt and bring my people the Israelites, company by company, out of the land of Egypt by great acts of judgment. ⁵The Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring the Israelites out from among them."¹

Introduction

Exodus 7:1-5 is the fourth reiteration of God's commands to Moses regarding Pharaoh and the Israelites, with the others being in Exod 3, 4:21-23, and 6:1-13. With these passages and the resulting plagues, readers have raised questions regarding God's powerfulness and good nature. For example, if God is all-powerful and good, why does he not just liberate the Israelites immediately, instead of dragging it out through ten plagues while manipulating Pharaoh, seemingly exacerbating the general suffering of people and land? My proposed answer to these concerns lies in the focus of this passage, which is God's relationship with the Egyptians. This is markedly different than previous passages where God's relationship with the Israelites is the main focal point. Dwelling on the Egyptian perspective in framing the passage, I will argue that Exod 7:1-5 describes how God establishes his sovereignty in Egypt, an action that defeats the Egyptian gods and lays the groundwork for the redemption of the Egyptians through the liberation of the Israelites. For present day application, Exod 7:1-5 is

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible references in this paper are to the Harper Collins Study Bible (NRSV) (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 1989).

evidence supporting that God's sovereignty over creation, including human hearts, should not be looked upon as a threat to the human condition, and that God works for the salvation of all people, even when he initially appears to benefit certain groups and harm others.

Contextual Analysis

Historical Context

To begin, the passage's literary and historical context should be established. For the purposes of this essay, it is important to describe the dominant religious beliefs that thrived in Egyptian society at the time of the Exodus narrative. Around the 13th century BC, which is the estimated dating of the Exodus, Egypt was in a time of transition in its religious uniformity. This was caused by the slow, natural reconciliation of three major belief systems: the pantheon of Egyptian gods, the state dogma of the divine rule of the pharaoh, and the installation of a more complex bureaucratic state that still contained divine authority. These three categories are by no means mutually exclusive, which produced confusion culturally, so "priests at the religious centers did try to work out logical theologies," and these three elements were eventually integrated together.² The relationship that was reached between these elements was that the pharaoh was indeed a god, "the incarnation and patron of Horus,"³ but he was not the sole divine. Rather, he came from the realm of the gods. Furthermore, in order to justify the need for an expanding bureaucratic state and to satisfy the cravings of power-hungry court advisors, the pharaoh "began to seek the oracle of the great gods to sanction the major

² Charles F. Pfeiffer, *Egypt and the Exodus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1964), 26.

³ *Ibid.*, 21.

enterprises of the state.”⁴ From this syncretism, it is then reasonable for the pharaoh, who is a god-figure, to consult the oracles of other gods, often in the stations of viziers or court magicians, to ascertain whether he was acting in accordance with the major gods in the Egyptian pantheon. If the pharaoh was strong or clever enough to align his actions with the major gods’ wills, he would be able to exert very strong pressure on Egyptian society to accept his authority. Conversely, if the pharaoh was weak, his advisors would be able to gradually marginalize his position in the government. Regardless of their relationships with their viziers, most pharaohs were able to maintain a strong hold over Egypt’s state and culture. This was true of the pharaohs that presided over Egypt shortly before and during the Exodus. Dorian G. Coover Cox, in his article “The Hardening of Pharaoh’s Heart in its Literary and Cultural Contexts,” confirms this description when he states, “The centrality of Egyptian kingship, its pivotal role in articulating the cosmos and creating order, and its religious, political, and moral authority pervade the ancient record.”⁵ This system of government and how it is viewed religiously and culturally by the Egyptians will later be shown to set up an important relational construct between God, Moses, Aaron, and their Egyptian counterparts.

Literary and Rhetorical Context

The literary context of Exod 7:1-5 is very important. For the immediate context, the passage is right after Exod 6:30 where Moses questions his ability to lead the

⁴ George Arthur Buttrick, ed., “Pharaoh,” *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (TIDB), 4 vols. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1962), 3:773-774.

⁵ Dorian G. Coover Cox, “The Hardening of Pharaoh’s Heart in its Literary and Cultural Contexts,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 163 (2006): 301.

Israelites, claiming that he is a poor speaker. God's speech in the beginning of Exod 7 is a direct response to Moses' doubt. This is not the first time in Exodus where Moses doubts his ability to lead the Israelites or speak to Pharaoh on God's behalf (Exod 3:11, 4:10, 6:12). Each time that Moses verbally expresses his doubt to God, God reassures him by detailing his plan and describing how Pharaoh and the Egyptians will react. Also, much of what is stated in Exod 7:1-5 has already been written earlier in the book. For example, statements such as the hardening of Pharaoh's heart (Exod 4:21), Pharaoh not letting the Israelites leave (Exod 3:19, 4:21), and the coming of mighty acts of judgment (Exod 3:20, 4:23, 6:6) can be found earlier in the narrative. Also, a genealogy of both Moses and Aaron is placed directly before Exod 7:1-5. This genealogy establishes Moses and Aaron as brothers and as Levites, which helps build the foundation for the Levite priesthood. This is important because it reiterates Moses' formal position in the Israelite community despite his upbringing by the Egyptian princess. The passage immediately following Exod 7:1-5 describes Moses and Aaron's next two meetings with Pharaoh and his magicians. In the first meeting, Aaron's staff transforms into a snake and eats the magicians' staves, which they were also able to turn into snakes. The second encounter marks the beginning of God's signs and wonders, the ten plagues, starting with Aaron turning the Nile into a river of blood, with the magicians able to match his feat. In both of these instances, the author consistently builds on the themes and claims made in Exod 7:1-5.

Exod 7:1-5's larger literary context in the book of Exodus as a whole is very important. The book of Exodus is separated into two main halves: the Israelites bondage and exodus from Egypt (Exod 1-18) and the Israelites at Mt. Sinai (Exod 19-

40).⁶ These two major sections of Exodus are not only conveniently separated by natural narrative breaks, but they also communicate different theological themes. Broadly speaking, the first half of Exodus identifies God, or Yahweh, as the true sovereign authority over creation and establishes Israel as a holy people, the priestly nation that should act as the intermediary between God and the world. Building off of these two major themes, the second half of Exodus contains instructions on how Israel can properly fulfill the requirements that come with being designated as the priestly nation. Exod 7:1-5 is in the middle of the first half of the book. It marks the beginning of the rising action, God's signs and wonders, that will eventually lead to the climax of the plot, namely the combination of the Passover and the crossing of the Red Sea, and the solution to the plot, which is the liberation of the Israelites and the defeat of Pharaoh. Exod 7:1-5's positioning in the narrative is also important because it lays the framework for viewing the coming signs and wonders from an Egyptian perspective, unlike Exodus 6, which builds the Israelite viewpoint. Because the Egyptian framework is the last one offered by the author, it should be the freshest in the mind of the reader when he or she begins to read through the plagues.

Form and Structure

Formal Analysis

Exodus, as a whole, is in the form of a historical narrative. It details the plight of the Israelites under Egyptian oppression and their subsequent liberation caused by God, who uses Moses and Aaron as his agents. As mentioned previously in the

⁶ Danny Mathews, Outline of Exodus [discussion], Biblical Interpretation course, November 26, 2012, Pepperdine University, Malibu.

discussion of literary context, Exod 7:1-5 is located on the tail end of the first narrative section of Exodus. The description of the Israelites' condition and the commissioning of Moses constitute the first section which is traditionally made up of the introduction and setting. The second section, the rising action or development of conflict, begins with the plagues. Exod 7:1-5 is used as a transitional passage to summarize the introduction and switch the focus of the narrative to the plagues, which escalate the conflict. With this narrative structure in mind during the detailed analysis, the character development and descriptions of Pharaoh and the Egyptians will be one of the major points of analysis.

Structural Analysis

The structure and movement of Exod 7:1-5 can be shown through an outline of the text:

- I. God's commands to Moses and Aaron (v.1-2)
 - A. Establishment of Moses and Aaron as god and prophet (v.1)
 - B. Individual speaking roles for Moses and Aaron (v.2)
- II. God's plan for the Egyptians (v.3-5)
 - A. Hardening Pharaoh's heart and multiplication of signs (v.3)
 - B. When Pharaoh does not listen, Israelites will be delivered by great acts of judgment (v.4)
 - C. This will lead to Egyptians knowing God (v.5)

When analyzing this passage alone, it is hard to distinguish any striking structural patterns or forms. However, when compared to similar passages in Exodus, such as

Exod 6:1-13, a series of repetitions can be clearly seen. The concepts that are repeated in Exod 7:1-5 are found in verses 4-5, which correspond with Exod 6:6-7. The repeated themes are that God will liberate the Israelites with mighty acts of judgment and, because of these acts, the people shall know God. The only difference between these two passages is the audience to which God is speaking. In Exod 6, the audience is the Israelites, whereas Exod 7:1-5 addresses Pharaoh and the Egyptians as the objects of God's actions.

Detailed Analysis

Exodus 7:1

In order to accomplish the end effect of having the Egyptians know him, which is the overall goal of the impending signs and wonders (Exod 7:5), God must reach out to the Egyptians in a way that they will understand. The meaning of “knowing” God, for the purposes of this essay, has two major interpretations: “to recognize the authority of” and “to come out of a state of ignorance,” especially in regards to God's redemptive nature and plan for salvation of all men. The first definition will be the main focus of the following analysis with the second meaning discussed in the section regarding Exod 7:5.

In Exod 7:1, God tells Moses: “See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron shall be your prophet.” Before discussing how this verse sets up a very important relationship dynamic between Moses, Aaron, Pharaoh, and his court magicians, it is worth going back in Exodus to provide a better framework for this situation. When Moses initially went to Pharaoh to petition for Israel's freedom,

Pharaoh rebuked him stating, “Who is the LORD, that I should heed him and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, and I will not let Israel go” (Exod 5:2). Dorian G. Coover Cox makes this observation concerning this passage:

[Exod 5:2] was, of course, not an admission of ignorance or a request for information. Personal identity and authority were at stake. When Nabal similarly asked, ‘Who is David? And who is the son of Jesse?’ (1 Sam 25:10), he added an insult that he knew precisely who David was but had no use for him or his request.⁷

Based on these claims, the dialogue between Pharaoh and Moses represents the proverbial drawing of a battle line, which distinguishes the two supposed sovereigns: Pharaoh and Yahweh. Exod 7:1 reveals the strategy that God plans on using to defeat Pharaoh, who “issued a blatant refusal to respond to or acknowledge his own subordinate and derivative position of power.”⁸ He sets up a temporary arrangement to mirror the Egyptian religious, political structure. God decides to challenge the Egyptians “on their own ground” and defeat them.⁹

As a quick review of the Egyptian’s set-up, they have a god-figure, Pharaoh, who is supposedly from the godly realm, and his oracles and court magicians aid him in aligning his will with the major gods of the Egyptian pantheon. God counters Pharaoh’s position by making Moses the new god-figure. He then makes Aaron his prophet, in order to have a counterpoint to Pharaoh’s court magicians. God himself acts as the major and only god of the Israelite pantheon. Pharaoh’s interactions with Moses and Aaron support this mirrored arrangement of divine forces, because he “had been brought up to believe that he was a god” and “may have very well come to think that

⁷ Cox, “The Hardening in Contexts,” 296.

⁸ Walter Brueggemann, “Pharaoh as Vassal: A Study of a Political Metaphor,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 57:1 (1995): 36.

⁹ H. L. Ellison, *Exodus*, The Daily Study Bible (Old Testament) Series, ed. John C. L. Gibson (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1982), 40.

Moses was in some sense god incarnate” which would help explain why he “did not adopt drastic measures against the two brothers” but instead entertained their requests, even if he planned on rejecting them.¹⁰

Additionally, while God chooses to mirror the divine relationship between the major players on either side of this conflict, he makes the theological symbolism behind each side antithetical to each other. Yahweh, and by extension Moses and Aaron, represent creation. Pharaoh, and by extension the Egyptian gods and the court magicians, represent anti-creation.

Another facet of Egyptian culture was the description of Pharaoh as “eternal, worthy of worship, omniscient, and the one who imbued Egypt with existence and power.”¹¹ Pharaoh’s perceived divine standing, his refusal to step down in Exod 5:2, and his bondage of Israel which was implemented to stop the Israelite population from expanding further (Exod 1:7), an act that countered God’s command to humanity in Gen 1:28, were enough of a testament to be considered an affront to creation and a violation of God’s sovereignty.¹² Pharaoh’s sins and God’s response is summarized nicely by W. Ross Blackburn, citing Terence Freitheim, writes:

Freitheim likewise sees creation as the fundamental background of the plagues...the conflict between the Lord and Pharaoh comes from the fact that Pharaoh’s sin is ‘anticreation’; that is, Pharaoh’s attempt to curb Israel’s growth goes against God’s creational purposes...The Lord’s response to judge Egypt by subverting creation to a pre-creation state [the plagues] is possible because, as the Creator, he can...[He is the] creator God, who controls all land, including Egypt.¹³

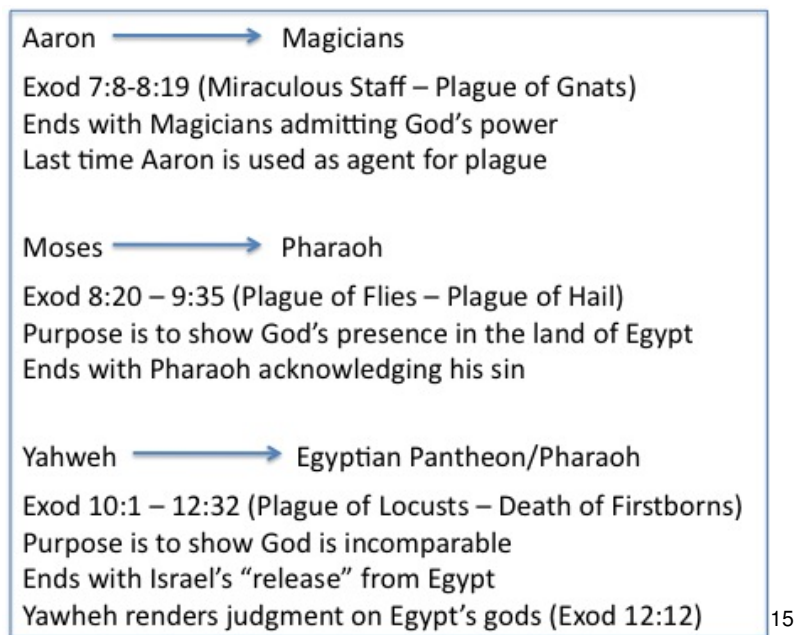
¹⁰ Ibid., 39.

¹¹ Arie C. Leder, “Hearing Exodus 7:8-13 to Preach the Gospel: The Ancient Adversary in Today’s World,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 43(2008): 96.

¹² Brueggemann, “Pharaoh as Vassal,” 33.

¹³ Ross W. Blackburn, *The God Who Makes Himself Known: The Missionary Heart of the Book of Exodus*, New Studies in Biblical Theology, ed. D. A. Carson (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 2012), 43.

Thus, God sets the stage for a power conflict between himself and the Egyptian gods and chooses the medium to wage this battle, in order that the Egyptians would recognize that he is indeed sovereign over all creation and not “a pretender to the cosmic throne.”¹⁴ The plague cycle, which follows Exod 7:1-5, is a systematic dismantling of both Egypt’s theology and its political arrangements that enforce it. Near the end of the plague cycle, God even announces that he will execute judgment on all the gods of Egypt (Exod 12:12). The following graphic is a rough summary of how the plague cycle represents the relationship dynamic:



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Exodus 7:2

Exod 7:2 expands on the role of both Moses and Aaron. God tells Moses to speak all that he is commanded and Aaron to tell Pharaoh to free the Israelites. This verse is important because it differentiates the constructions of the divine relationships

¹⁴ Leder, “Hearing Exodus,” 96.

¹⁵ Danny Mathews, Plague Cycle [lecture], Biblical Interpretation course, November 5, 2012, Pepperdine University, Malibu.

of Moses and the Egyptians. For the Egyptians, Pharaoh is considered to be truly divine, so his authority over the land and people is weighted with divine absolutism. In this verse, God makes clear that, even though Moses is like God to Pharaoh, he is still a man, and God still remains sovereign over him. This verse also shows how God's vassals should properly act. When following through on these instructions, "Moses and Aaron use esteemed Egyptian practices to humiliate Pharaoh" and "the power of Egyptian magic."¹⁶ This distinction is important because it shows that God reaches out to the Egyptians in a relatable way without sacrificing or compromising his true nature and authority.

Exodus 7:3

In Exod 7:3, God says that he "will harden Pharaoh's heart" and multiply his "signs and wonders in the land of Egypt." The concept of hardening Pharaoh's heart is as controversial as it is important. The analysis of this verse will attempt to discover useful insights into how both Egyptian and Hebrew cultures viewed the heart and the idea of hardening it. An interpretation of why God chooses to harden Pharaoh's heart and how that relates to giving the Egyptians knowledge will be only partially given in this analysis and will be completed in the following verse analyses. To begin, the Egyptians believed that the heart was an extremely important element of humans. Not only was it vital for a person biologically, it was the entire "focus of the individual – body, spirit, soul, and will." This meant that the heart governed the entirety of an individual's personality

¹⁶ Leder, "Hearing Exodus," 96.

and his or her “relationship with God.”¹⁷ For Pharaoh, the heart had an even greater role as “the king of Egypt’s heart was held to be the locus for control of cosmic order.”¹⁸ However, the heart, despite its close connection to the individual, was separate from the person. This allowed it to “forsake its owner, enter into dialogue with him, but also forsake him.”¹⁹

For the Israelites, the heart contained several of the same qualities. The Hebrew word used for heart, in anglicized form, is “*leb*.”²⁰ The heart was the “center of physical vitality” and “the part of the man through which he normally achieved contact with the divine.” The Israelites also believed that the heart, “as the innermost spring of human personality, is directly open to God and subject to his influence.”²¹ Basically, for both cultures, the heart was both an important physical component of the body and a connection an individual had with the divine. Scriptural texts that refer to “the religious and ethical realm of the relationship between human beings and God make frequent use of *leb*.” Both cultures also believed that states of the heart were sometimes outside of the individual’s control. The Israelites believed God could control it because “the creator of *leb* is also the universal lord and judge,” while the Egyptians believed that a person’s heart could forsake and work against its owner.²² This means that God’s interactions with the heart will roughly have the same implications for both the Egyptian and Israelite frame in the events of Exod 7:3.

¹⁷ G. Johannes Botterweck, ed., “*Leb*,” *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (TDOT), 10 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974-1999), 7:401.

¹⁸ Cox, “The Hardening in Contexts,” 307.

¹⁹ TDOT, “*Leb*,” 401.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 400.

²¹ TIDB, “Heart,” 2:549.

²² TDOT, “*Leb*,” 425.

In the battle God has set up between himself and the Egyptians gods, God prepares for a complete victory. Thus, God must be made known to have conquered both the pantheon of gods and the individual god-figure. God plans on achieving both feats by hardening Pharaoh's heart. Hardness of the heart, particularly in the Exodus narrative, has been a point of much contention for theologians. However, hardness of heart, even when God is the agent of hardening, can be found elsewhere in Hebrew tradition. Obduracy (*qasa*), another term for hardness, is "particularly associated with the *leb*, and warnings against *qasa* of the *leb* can be found in several places in the Old Testament outside of Exodus" (Deut 2:30, Ps 95:8, Prov 28:14, Isa 63:17).²³ Other than these sporadic mentioning of obduracy of heart, the terms *leb* and *qasa* can be found in the Old Testament's "holy war tradition." Interestingly enough, this tradition is consistent with "the idea that Yahweh himself hardens people's hearts."²⁴ Robert R. Wilson, in his article "The Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart," elaborates on this point:

In Deut. 2:30 Moses tells of the holy war against Sihon, king of Hesbon, and notes that Yahweh hardened the king's spirit...and made his heart stubborn...in order to give him into the hand of the Israelites...it is possible that in Exod 7:3 P used *qasa* with Yahweh as the subject to invoke Deut 2:30. Similarly, Josh 11:20 sums up Joshua's successful holy wars by saying that Yahweh was the one responsible for the hardening the hearts of the Canaanite kings so that they would come out and be destroyed...In both cases, just as in Exod 7:3-5, the hardening leads to the destruction of the enemy and the victory for Israel.²⁵

Therefore, Exod 7:1-5 keeps in the Israelite tradition of God causing victory in war by hardening the hearts of the enemy's leader. Having established that Exodus pits Yahweh against the Egyptian gods, including Pharaoh, it is not abnormal that God would harden Pharaoh's heart and use Pharaoh against himself thus showing the

²³ Ibid., 427.

²⁴ Robert R. Wilson, "The Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 41:1 (1979): 33.

²⁵ Ibid.

absolute nature of his sovereignty over the land of Egypt, its gods, and Pharaoh's own person.

Hardening of heart is also found in Egyptian religious tradition. Recalling the analysis of Exod 7:1, God decides to battle the Egyptian gods on their own terms, which was the reasoning behind the leadership dynamics between God, Moses, and Aaron. It is then fitting that God would use the idea of a hardened heart to support Israelite tradition and defeat Pharaoh with aspects of Egyptian theology. An alternate way to translate the word meaning hardness or obduracy is heaviness. The idea of physical weight is vital because, in Egyptian belief, "the gods Anubis and Thoth weighed and recorded the weight of a person's heart after death." A light heart would garner eternal life, whereas a heavy heart would elicit damnation. This "may show that Pharaoh's heart was failing by his own standards and his expectations of judgment."²⁶ When Pharaoh's heart forcibly betrays him, God is shown to have overpowered Pharaoh's will, the symbolic cosmic center of Egyptian theology. God uses this tactic as an avenue to spread his signs and wonders to overcome the rest of the Egyptian pantheon and make his power known throughout the rest of Egypt.

Exodus 7:4

The next verse is Exod 7:4, which takes the action stated in the previous verse and adds the liberation of the Israelites to the equation. This verse, like the previous one, highlights an important characteristic of God's plan. God's acts of judgment will be effective throughout the land of Egypt. As mentioned previously, God wants to affect all the Egyptians, not just Pharaoh and his court. In order to accomplish this, God must

²⁶ Cox, "The Hardening in Contexts," 305.

make his judgment and power visible to all those in Egypt. This means his actions, later revealed to be the plagues, will reach across the width and breadth of the land (Exod 8:22), from the houses of peasants (Exod 9:25, 12:33) to the very depths of Pharaoh's heart. Martin Noth, in his commentary about Exodus, writes that it is "Yahweh himself who again and again brings about Pharaoh's unwillingness so as to display his wonderful power to Egypt and the Egyptians in manifold ways."²⁷ It is important to remember that God uses Pharaoh's obduracy to reach all of Egypt through the plagues. In Exod 9:14-15, God makes Pharaoh explicitly aware that he "could have stricken" and killed him at any time and that God was sending the plagues onto Pharaoh and his people. However, the Hebrew in verse 14 literally means that the plagues are being sent "to your [Pharaoh's] heart."²⁸ This verse, with the others in Exod 7:1-5, sets up a reversal of fortune for the Egyptians. In his battle against the Egyptian gods, God ultimately becomes the oppressor of Egypt through the process of the Israelites' liberation. As the Israelites are freed from Egypt, the Egyptians become the oppressed population. This concept is key to understanding the next verse and the passage as a whole.

Exodus 7:5

The final verse, Exod 7:5, states that the "Egyptians shall know that I am LORD." This statement is the end goal of the plan God detailed in this passage. It also shows the result of the battle God plans to wage with the Egyptian gods. The Egyptians acknowledging God signifies the defeat of the Egyptian dogma. Earlier, in the analysis

²⁷ Martin Noth, *Exodus: A Commentary*, Translated by J. S. Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1962), 67.

²⁸ Cox, "The Hardening in Contexts," 299.

of Exod 7:1, it was stated that “knowing” God could be interpreted in multiple ways. First, it could be understood to mean “recognize the authority of,” and this meaning was expounded upon in earlier sections of the paper. The second interpretation of “knowing” is more literal in that it suggests “knowing” means “to come out of a state of ignorance,” especially in regards to God’s redemptive characteristics and plans for the salvation of all men. To know God in the first sense does not necessitate the existence of the second sense, so the following analysis will attempt to show how this passage lays the groundwork for establishing knowledge in the Egyptians according to the latter definition.

From the outset, this passage presents a problem. How will the Egyptians know God if he is deliberately hardening their leader, thus preventing him from change? The answer to how the Egyptians will come to knowledge of God is derived from several places: a further investigation of the nature of the heart, the new situation of Egyptians as the oppressed people, and connections Exod 7:1-5 has with Isaiah 19.²⁹

At the start of Exod 7:5, Pharaoh has a hardened heart, which is working to oppress himself personally and the citizenry as a whole. Because Pharaoh’s actions would have the power of absolutism behind them, his hardness should be expanded to represent the response of the people’s general psyche toward the actions of God. The hardening itself is an absolute pledge of allegiance to the Egyptian gods and denial of God as Yahweh. The only way to liberate the Egyptians from the hardness of Pharaoh’s heart, a condition that could last beyond Pharaoh’s death, is to have God reverse his actions and soften the heart of Egypt. This assertion is supported by the Hebrew belief that the “hope for its [the heart’s] betterment must lie rather in God’s

²⁹ TODT, “*Lahas*,” 7:553.

transforming grace than in any educational activity on the part of the man”³⁰ and the Egyptian belief that “the heart is also where God can be known and God’s will recognized.”³¹ Taken together, these beliefs would indicate a dependence on God to soften the Egyptians’ hearts in order to give them knowledge of himself as Yahweh.

In summation, the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart has resulted in the defeat of Egypt’s god-figure and destined Egypt to become the oppressed instead of the oppressors. This reversal “is one of the ironies of history” because “knowledge of the true God” came to Egypt from a nation being used as a “pawn,” while Egypt itself was a major world power but only “entertained crass theories of the universe.”³² Also, the only way Egypt can be redeemed and liberated is to acknowledge God. The catch is that only God can induce the change of heart required to gain the necessary knowledge. Obviously, Exod 7:5 states that “the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD [Yahweh],” which indicates that God will indeed reverse his hardening. H. L. Ellison, in his Exodus commentary, supports this view when he writes: “This expression [shall know that I am Yahweh]...is not the revelation of a name but of a character of the one who owns it, as shown especially in his power, displayed in punishment, in protection and in grace.”³³ Thus, God maintains his role as the liberator: first to the Israelites and then to their former oppressors, the Egyptians.

Even though the Egyptians were experiencing God’s oppressive might, knowledge of his ability to save was not far away from them. W. Ross Blackburn claims that “the supremacy of the Lord exposes Pharaoh and the gods of Egypt as helpless to

³⁰ TIDB, “Heart,” 2:550.

³¹ TODT, “*Leb*,” 7:402.

³² Pfeiffer, *Egypt and the Exodus*, 32.

³³ Ellison, *Exodus*, 39.

save.”³⁴ Throughout the plague cycle, God displays his power through many signs and wonders, but he spares the Israelites from his mighty acts (Exod 8:22-23, 9:4-6, 9:26, 10:23, 12:27). Blackburn addresses these instances by stating, “the connection between the Lord as Creator and his ability to save is not incidental.”³⁵ He uses Isa 40:28 and Jer 10:11 to express that the identity of God as Creator is a comfort to a “captive people” and a strict warning to believers in false gods, who will be swept away.³⁶ This argument supports the claim that God works in the Exodus to bring Egypt under his might by striking them, yet in the midst of their suffering, he makes known his ability to be their path to salvation.

The dual nature of the Egyptians coming to knowledge is further reflected in Isaiah 19. Isaiah 19:1 asserts: “the idols of Egypt will tremble” in God’s presence and “the heart of the Egyptians will melt within them.” Furthermore, at the end of the chapter, in verse 17, the author states that Egyptians “will fear because of the plan that the LORD of hosts is planning against them.” Finally, and most importantly, verses 20-22 state:

...when they [Egyptians] cry to the LORD because of oppressors, he will send them a savior, and will defend and deliver them. The LORD will make himself known to the Egyptians; and the Egyptians will know the LORD on that day...The LORD will strike Egypt, striking and healing; they will return to the LORD... (Isa 19:20-22)

Isaiah 19 corresponds to the plans God lays out in Exodus 7:1-5. God makes the oppressors the oppressed; then, God liberates them and makes himself known to them. While the scenario in Isaiah might not be referring to the situation that plays out in Exodus 7:1-5, the similarity in God’s actions in both cases is compelling. The similarity

³⁴ Blackburn, *The God Who Makes Himself Known*, 44-45.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

gives support to the claim that God hardens the heart of Egypt in order that the Egyptians, through their new state of oppression, come to know God in the proper light and discover the liberation found in him. Isaiah even shows that God needs to melt the heart of the Egyptians within their idols, which parallels the need for God to melt the hardened heart of Pharaoh, who as a divine god-figure was an idol in his own right for the Egyptian people. In addition, Isaiah mentions a “striking and healing” of Egypt, which has connections to the destructive yet ultimately redemptive quality of the plagues, which are described by a form of the word “strike” in several instances (Exod 3:19-20, 7:17, 7:20, 7:25, 8:16-17, 9:3, 9:25, 12:23).

Synthesis

When analyzing Exod 7:1-5 using the frame of reference of the Egyptians, God is shown to assert his sovereignty over the land and heart of Egypt, which begins the redemptive process for the Egyptians, while liberating the Israelites from Egypt's oppression. God's speech to Moses in Exodus 7 is not the first time he outlines his plans to free the Israelites. However, it is the first time the Egyptians are the primary recipients of God's actions. This switch creates a clear juxtaposition between Exodus 7:1-5 and Exodus 6:1-13. In both accounts, the same plan is outlined, but the focus is changed from the Israelites to the Egyptians. This framework is presented right as the narrative begins its ascent towards its climax, which makes it the freshest perspective in the mind of the reader. God works through the Egyptian culture and religious dogma to defeat it and harden Egypt's heart. This process flips the status of the Egyptians from the oppressors to the oppressed. They are oppressed by both the destruction of the

plagues and the grip of their own hearts on themselves. God, acting as liberator, frees them of their own captivity and grants them knowledge of himself as LORD or Yahweh. This is the first part of the redemption of Egypt as a whole.

Reflection

The theological messages sent from Exod 7:1-5 to the modern day Christians are humbling. This passage presents God as an agent who works for the salvation of all people in the world, whether they are slaves or slave masters. His methods, on the other hand, present a challenge to believers. It is humbling to realize that God has control of all human hearts and will manipulate them in order that all people may know his grace and salvation. It is easy in this situation to rashly judge the actions of God towards the Egyptians as vindictive and overly harsh. However, God's actions in the Exodus narrative are twofold; he liberates the Israelites and begins the process of redemption for Egypt. Because many people only focus on the Exodus narrative from the Israelites' perspective, their view of the Egyptians is often one that drops them from significance after the Israelites escape their bondage. When viewed from the Egyptian framework, their story does not end with the Exodus. Instead, they gain the knowledge of God as Yahweh, and, even though the process was determined by God to be devastating via the plagues, the long term spiritual state of the Egyptians has the chance to involve redemption.

Secondly, the idea of God manipulating the hearts of men is often one that causes believers to stumble in their day-to-day walks. It presents an affront to the beloved idea of free will. If God has sovereignty over hearts, where is the free will to

love and follow him? This understanding creates a sham of an existence for many people who are hostile to the idea of predestination. However, Exodus 7:1-5 and the greater plague cycle do not present an all-or-nothing dichotomy of God having control over everything or humans have free will. These ideas are not mutually exclusive. Dorian G. Coover Cox offers an enlightening perspective to this issue that was not explored in this exegesis: Moses' perspective. As readers, we should remember that Moses knew about the hardening of Pharaoh's heart as God told him this explicitly at least twice (Exod 4:21, 7:3). However, Moses did not react to God's actions as though "the conflict was a sham."³⁷ He did not treat life as pointless, thinking he and others were only puppets. In fact, in Exod 11:8, near the end of the plague cycle, Moses left Pharaoh "in hot anger." Cox claims that "Moses was not blaming Pharaoh when Pharaoh had no choice. That Moses held him accountable here, so late in the course of events, tends to undermine theories that free Pharaoh from responsibility of the Lord's hardening of Pharaoh's heart."³⁸ It is also worth remembering that Pharaoh recognized multiple times that he had sinned against God (Exod 9:27, 10:16). When integrating Moses' display of emotions in response to Pharaoh, it is clear that he remained culpable for his actions and had opportunities to relent, in spite of his hardening heart. What can we, living in the present day, take away from this? We can look to God for salvation and help, even if it appears that the world is thrusting us down a path to an unavoidable, seemingly harmful end. Because God is sovereign over everything, including the environment and our hearts, he is able to reach through those things to get to us. It is a comforting thought that God can break through all obstacles, both internal and external

³⁷ Cox, "The Hardening in Contexts," 298.

³⁸ Ibid., 300-301.

in our lives. We should not go about living sinful and destructive lives because, as was the case with Pharaoh, we remain responsible for our actions and thoughts. Instead, we should strive to follow God humbly and trust in his redemptive nature and promises of salvation. Although it is a bit out of context, God tells Moses in Num 11:23, when Moses doubts God's control over nature, "Is the LORD's power limited? Now you shall see whether my word will come true for you or not." I believe that verse is a good thing to remember when faced with doubt about God's power to reach out to you.

Additionally, we must not judge God's actions authoritatively unless God explicitly describes his actions in a certain way. Because humans have a finite ability to see the scope of God's plan and how all the pieces come together, humanity is bound to make mistakes and misjudge the full implications of God's actions. Instead, believers should strive to understand God's actions through the lenses he gives us in Scripture. In this state of humility, the faith community should be better equipped to discern God's plan and his will for their lives, while better understanding their role in the lives of others. This still will leave grey areas for believers, such as what is the point behind natural disasters that ruin the livelihood of large amounts of people? As with the full reasoning behind the plagues against the people of Egypt, the meaning might not be fully realized for a long time, and believers need to approach these situations with faith and trust in God's promises, his control over the world, and his ultimate goals as outlined in Scripture. These are not comfy, feel-good answers to questions regarding why "bad" things happen to "good" people or similar inquiries, but they thrust the community of faith into a position where they must put their faith in God, trusting in his goodness and knowing that he works in ways that are mysterious to this world.

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